Kunapipi

Volume 20 | Issue 2 Article 6

1998

Dear Future

Danny Morrison

Dear Future

Abstract

The bodies have been buried. There was no retaliation. The soldiers have been withdrawn from the streets of Belfast but on every corner the ghosts of the dead remain stranded until their features fade with memory. The odd British army helicopter, of course, still carries out surveillance. The border is still patrolled. Some militants, stranded with the ghosts of comrades, embittered or hurt too much, still imagine circumstances where the old struggle can be replicated. Some unionists, bitter, intransigent, also hurt, recalling their dead, still indulge in the dream of stopping the clock, or better still, turning it back.

DANNY MORRISON

Dear Future

There will be red, then there will be black – Fred D'Aguiar

The bodies have been buried. There was no retaliation. The soldiers have been withdrawn from the streets of Belfast but on every corner the ghosts of the dead remain stranded until their features fade with memory.

The odd British army helicopter, of course, still carries out surveillance. The border is still patrolled. Some militants, stranded with the ghosts of comrades, embittered or hurt too much, still imagine circumstances where the old struggle can be replicated. Some unionists, bitter, intransigent, also hurt, recalling their dead, still indulge in the dream of stopping the clock, or better still, turning it back.

It is October the 1st, 1998, and today the Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams has had his third meeting with the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, David Trimble. This is progress. Even if they havent agreed. They were attempting to sort out the issue of decommissioning of IRA weapons – the very contentious issue over which the first phase of the peace process and the first IRA ceasefire back in 1994 broke down. Trimble, now the First Minister in the new northern Assembly as a result of the extraordinary political developments this year, is refusing to form a multiparty executive which includes Sinn Fein or set-up cross-border executive bodies until the IRA agrees a timetable and verification process. No such requirement from Sinn Fein – other than a pledge to use its influence to bring decommissioning about – is in the Belfast Agreement signed on Good Friday. In fact, Trimble lost that argument of linkage back then. But it is the latest crisis and it has the potential to once again de-rail all the progress to date. But let us go back. Let us see how we arrived at this point. What sort of a year has it been. Has peace won the war?

British army helicopters have been in the sky above Belfast almost continuously since 1971 when the IRA launched its armed struggle; apart from Christmases, that is, when the combatants like civilized beings observed unofficial ceasefires. In mid-July 1998 the helicopters were, unusually, not above the skies of republican districts in Belfast looking out for possible dissident IRA activity but were monitoring working-class unionist areas for gangs of loyalists roaming the streets, setting up illegal roadblocks, rioting and hijacking vehicles. In several towns loyalist

paramilitaries (mostly associated with the Loyalist Volunteer Force, the LVF) were throwing grenades at, and opening fire on, their *allies* – members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (the RUC), 90% of whom are from the Protestant community, and on British soldiers. In the same period ten rural Catholic churches and several schools were destroyed in arson attacks, and Catholic families were petrol-bombed from their homes in mixed areas. It was all so reminiscent – the past as our future.

The immediate cause of the trouble was the decision of the Parades Commission to ban Orangemen from marching from Drumcree Church of Ireland graveyard through Garvaghy Road, the Catholic quarter of Portadown, a town 40 miles outside of Belfast. Annually, the Orangemen celebrate the victory of the Dutch William of Orange over the Catholic heir to the English throne, James II, in 1690, fought on Irish soil. The indigenous Irish supported James: the English and Scottish settlers of the Ulster Plantation supported William. As a result of the ban several thousand Orangemen camped on the hillside at Drumcree, determined that they would get their way.

The Parades Commission was established in law by the British government to independently adjudicate on the controversial marching issue after the unrest in 1997. The British government had banned certain marches in the past but then disgracefully reversed its decisions when loyalists threatened and used widespread violence, including assassinating innocent Catholics. Nationalists were then batoned off their own streets to allow the Orangemen to march, leaving nationalists angry at being treated as second-class citizens, almost 30 years after the founding of the civil rights movement.

The difference between 1997 and 1998 is that last May people in both parts of Ireland in two referenda voted for the Belfast Agreement, an agreement which was negotiated by *most* of the political parties over a period of months and signed on Good Friday. The votes in the North (the Six Counties) was 70% in favour. For the first time in 75 years Sinn Fein, which is associated with the IRA, took part in the negotiations, their inclusion having been secured by the renewal of the IRAs ceasefire in July 1997.

The main points of the Agreement were: the establishment of an elected Assembly in the North with a power-sharing Executive representative of both communities, and the emplacement of cross-border and all-Ireland bodies to deal with social and economic matters; Southern Ireland would relinquish its territorial claim over the North; that the Dublin government and the nationalist community accept that there will be no change in the (British) constitutional status of the North without the consent of a majority (thus giving the unionists the assurances they have been requiring); that political prisoners belonging to those organizations observing ceasefires would be released within two years; and that both communities would be recognized as having equal rights.

The Agreement also says that the Assembly and the Executive can only

function if they enjoy the support of a majority in both communities. Furthermore, they can only function if the all-Ireland and cross-border bodies (their third tier) that deal with social and economic matters are also facilitated and supported by the Assembly. While Sinn Fein places great store in these bodies the unionists, from Trimble to Paisley, have major problems with their all-Ireland nature, and have expressed fears that these are the first step to a united Ireland.

A close examination of the referendum vote in the North and the share of the seats in Junes Assembly elections reveals that unionists are split virtually down the middle over the Agreement. In the referendum the unionist community voted 31.12% Yes. But 28.88% of them voted No, against the recommendation of the leader of the mainstream Ulster Unionist Party, David Trimble, who is by no means noted for his moderation. In fact, Trimble became party leader in 1995 for being identified with the Orange victory at that years Drumcree when the British government capitulated to their demands to march through Garvaghy Road. In June, just over 30 pro-Agreement unionists were elected, including two from loyalist paramilitary parties on ceasefire, as opposed to 25 anti-Agreement candidates under a coalition led by the old man of sectarian politics, the fundamentalist preacher, Ian Paisley.

The siege at Drumcree in 1998 was being used by Paisley and the Orange Order to try and subvert the Agreement and undermine Trimble. Paisley said, This is a battle that has to be won. No ifs. No buts. For nationalists it had become a litmus test of whether the Agreement and the new dispensation could deliver them from the sectarian triumphalism which has been a hallmark of the Six-County state since its inception. If nationalists are no longer second-class citizens then the Orangemen require *their* consent to march through *their* district just as, in the bigger picture, nationalists accept that there will not be a British withdrawal and a re-united Ireland without the consent of the unionists.

In Portadown the Orange Order refused to negotiate with the Catholic residents for two reasons. One, they insisted that they have a *traditional* right to march, regardless of the changed demographics of the now 100% nationalist area (over the years many of the Catholic families living here came as refugees, having been driven from homes in mixed areas). And, two, because the elected spokesperson for the residents, Councillor Brendan McKenna, is a former republican prisoner. This refusal to negotiate mirrored exactly the position also of David Trimble who until September refused to recognize Gerry Adams party, Sinn Fein, despite an IRA ceasefire, Sinn Fein signing the Belfast Agreement, and the party having 18 members elected to the 108-seat Assembly.

To take its seats in the Assembly Sinn Fein took the radical step of ending the partys 70-year-old policy of abstentionism, leading to accusations from a small number of dissident republicans, some of whom had split from the IRA, that Sinn Fein had sold out traditional republican principles. These

dissidents called themselves the Real IRA. They were formed after a secret IRA Convention in October 1997 (specially called at the behest of the critics of the peace process) at which they were defeated by a majority of delegates who opted to support the leaderships direction and keep the guns quiet. This minority split away and by mid-1998 they were car-bombing small towns throughout the North, mostly from bases in the South. Sinn Fein countered their criticisms by stating that its approach was in fact the more revolutionary one and reflected an increasing confidence among the nationalist community which makes up 40% of the population in the North.

The Assembly held its first meeting on July 1st and elected David Trimble as First Minister and as his deputy, Seamus Mallon of the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party, the SDLP (which got six seats more than Sinn Fein). Sinn Feins strength entitles it to two seats on the Executive but before the make-up of the Executive was decided the Assembly went into recess, just before the Drumcree siege.

In the early hours of Sunday morning, 12 July, loyalists petrol-bombed the working-class home of 29-year-old Christine Quinn, a Catholic, in Ballymoney, a town about 30 miles north of Belfast. Her three children, Richard (11), Mark (10) and Jason (9) were burned to death. There was immediate public revulsion but still the Orangemen at Drumcree refused to call a halt to their siege of Garvaghy Road, and even tried to rumour that the deaths were carried out by a relative of Chrissie Quinn and had nothing to do with them. Their spokesperson, David Jones, then claimed that the RUC had put some loyalists up to carrying out the petrol-bombing in order to discredit the siege!

That Sunday afternoon a chaplain for the Orange Order, the Reverend William Bingham, declared from the pulpit of his church that a fifteen minute walk down Garvaghy Road would be a very hollow victory because it would be in the shadow of three coffins. He said that Orangeman should go home. Across the world the Orangemen were condemned. Even newspapers in Britain normally sympathetic to their cause began to question the cost of the Union and whether it was worth it. On Monday the Belfast nationalist paper, the Irish News, caught the forlorn mood of the times. On its front page, under the photographs of the children, it reproduced Rückert's poem Kindertotenlieder (Songs on the Death of Children):

In this weather, in this storm,
I would never have sent the children out;
Someone took them out,
I could have no say in it.

In this weather, in this turmoil,
I would never have let the children go out;
I would have been afraid they might be hurt,
Now these are idle thoughts.

In this weather, in this horror,
I would never have let the children go out,
I was worried they might die the next day,
That is now not a thing to worry about.

In this weather, in this storm,
I would never have send the children out;
Someone took them out,
I could have no say in it.

In this weather, in this turmoil, in this storm,
They rest as if in their mothers house,
Not frightened by any storm,
Protected by the hand of God.

Though sporadic violence continued for another two nights the numbers on the hillside decreased. At some parades on the following Monday Orangemen openly shouted disagreements at each other, with the Reverend William Bingham being physically attacked and thrown into a ditch. The Orange Order was in disarray. The RUC and British army occupied the hillside, made arrests and recovered weapons and explosive devices, and effectively ended the occupation.

The immediate political fall-out of the deaths of the three children was to cause a lot of soul-searching among Orangemen and unionists, and appeared to strengthen the hand of supporters of the Agreement, and, in particular, strengthen the leadership of David Trimble against extremists from within his own party and without. One week before the burning to death of the children, the Orangemen at Drumcree had planned to muster 100,000 people on that hillside to force the British government to capitulate. A few days later the fields were empty and it seemed that we had all been given another chance.

Then came Omagh.

At ten past three, on Saturday, 15th August, a car bomb exploded in the main street of Omagh (70 miles from Belfast), killing 29 men, women and children and severely injuring scores of others. It was the worse single incident in the Troubles. It was an act of violence so beyond-the-rules of any conceivable perception of legitimate engagement, and so out of tune with the desire of the Irish nation for peace, that Gerry Adams condemned it without reservation. Up until Omagh Sinn Fein representatives had steadfastly refused to use the word condemn, not only because of its association with the hypocritical double-standards of unionist and British politicians who refuse to condemn British violence, but because Sinn Fein had viewed armed struggle as a legitimate response to the British presence and to British interference. Sinn Fein was now signalling the primacy of politics over armed struggle and, indeed, a few weeks later Gerry Adams intimated that the war was over when he said that violence must now be a thing of the past, over, done with, gone.

So outraged by Omagh was the public and so intense was public pressure on the anything but Real IRA that within a week it called a total ceasefire. London and Dublin had reacted swiftly with amendments to the emergency laws making conviction on membership charges easier to obtain (a draconian measure, actually in breach of the spirit of the Belfast Agreement). Furthermore, the dissident republicans frantically contacted the media to claim that they had been threatened by the Provisional IRA (that is, the *real* IRA) that they would be dealt with if they didnt ceasefire. Shortly, afterwards, the LVF and the Irish National Liberation Army also declared ceasefires, leaving the ineffectual Continuity IRA (associated with Republican Sinn Fein which split from Sinn Fein in 1986) the only group not on ceasefire.

One would have thought that circumstances could not have been more propitious for political progress. But then, in September, David Trimble, created a full-scale crisis when he once again placed all emphasis on IRA decommissioning, or, in its absence, that Sinn Fein not be allowed to sit on the future Executive. Certainly, Trimble remains under pressure from his own party dissidents. And the Orange Order and Paisley continually accuse him of being prepared to sit with Sinn Fein in government while the IRA holds on to its arsenal of explosives and guns (which it shipped from Libya in the late eighties).

There is no doubt that the IRA inflicted heavy suffering on the unionist community and that unionist anger is genuine. On the issue of prison releases the unionist parties and much of the media have tended to concentrate on IRA prisoners and the anger and dismay their release will cause to the relatives of those whose loved ones were killed. What is completely ignored, of course, is that in the case of over four hundred nationalist families in the North they will never even be in the position to experience such anger and dismay because the people who killed their loved ones – these people being members of the RUC and British army –never served a day in prison in the first place, and they have been and still are protected by those politicians shouting loudest. Another fear opponents of the process have raised is the prospect of all these prisoners rejoining an intact, heavily armed IRA. But over thirty years, even when the jails were full, there was never a time when the IRA failed to recruit. The unionists either cannot see or choose not to see that the IRA has a will to peace.

Back in the 1960s the IRA split and the Provisional IRA was formed partly because its leadership had decommissioned the majority of the organizations weapons, leaving the nationalist community virtually undefended when the pogroms of August 1969 were unleashed by unionist supporters helped by considerable numbers of RUC men, and Catholics were burned out of their homes, their churches and schools destroyed. IRA decommissioning, in republican eyes, is synonymous with surrendering, yet as far as the IRA is concerned it may not have won the war but it certainly did not lose it either.

Perhaps the only circumstances in which the IRA might decommission are

those where certain conditions prevail. There would need to be institutions in place in which nationalists had confidence. A new police service – not the RUC – representative of both communities would need to be established. And, finally, nationalists would have to feel secure and free from the types of sectarian attacks to which they have been subjected, not just this year, but throughout the history of the Northern Ireland state.

At the time of writing, in addition to the row over decommissioning, no Executive has been formed, and the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists cannot agree which areas should come under the authority of the cross-border bodies.

Saturday, August 22nd, in Belfast was sunny but unseasonably chilly – weather consistent with one of the worse summers we ever had, though summer had started out promising, as promising as the political climate which saw the historic breakthrough in the talks, the Agreement, and popular support for the Referenda. On that day I walked to St Peters Pro-Cathedral to take part in a Vigil of Prayer, like thousands of others across Ireland, in memory of the Omagh victims: an eighteen-month-old baby, a twenty-month-old baby, an eight-year-old girl, a twelve-year-old boy, two Spanish teenagers, a sixty-five-year-old woman... A candle was lit for each person, and two roses were laid for the unborn infants of Mrs Avril Monaghan, eight-months pregnant, whose daughter and mother also died.

I thought to myself: the days of intransigence, the days of bombast, the days of bombing are over. But it is shameful that we shall live on the backs of the dead. Not just one killed, not just three, not just four, but an unconscionable toll... Hopefully, it will all look slightly different through the prism of time, and there will come a time when there will not be red, when there will not be black, the colours of blood and despair, but there will be blue, the blue skies of peace.

Dear Future...

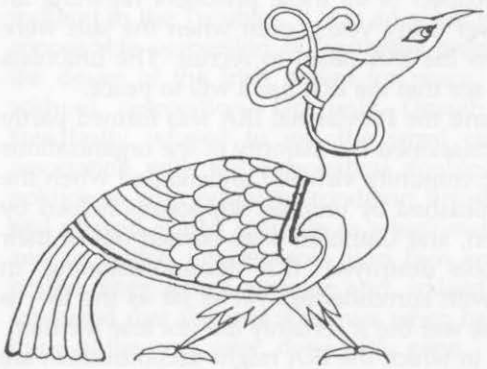

Illustration: Jeanne Jeffares